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Article

Romania's Arab Students: A Growing Terrorist Problem for the Regime

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The growing political activism of Middle Eastern students attending Romanian universities is complicating President Ceausescu's efforts to maintain good relations with all the countries and political movements in the Middle East. Intra-Arab student rivalries have resulted in several violent incidents in recent months, and Ceausescu's involvement in Middle Eastern diplomacy may make Romanians themselves a target. Terrorists could also use the student network to carry out attacks against US or other Western targets

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Some articles are preliminary views of a subject or speculative, but the contents normally will be coordinated as appropriate with other offices within CIA. Occasionally an article will represent the views of a single analyst; these items will be designated as noncoordinated views. Comments may be directed to the authors,

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Article

**Romania's Arab Students:
A Growing Terrorist Problem
for the Regime** [REDACTED]

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The increased hostility among Arab countries and within Palestinian organizations over PLO and Jordanian peace initiatives has prompted stepped-up political activity and violence among the various Arab student factions in Romania. According to official statistics, in 1982 there were approximately 20,000 foreign students in Romania, and we believe over half of them were Arabs. Data by nationality are not available, but Jordanian diplomats estimate the number of Palestinian students alone at 6,000. [REDACTED]

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The most serious incident to date was the assassination in Bucharest last December of a Jordanian diplomat by a radical Palestinian student.

[REDACTED] caused a major political embarrassment for President Ceausescu. We believe the perpetrator was the Abu Nidal terrorist group, formerly known as the Black June organization, which operates out of Syria. Its members have repeatedly attacked Jordanian targets elsewhere and threatened further violence since King Hussein agreed last November to allow PLO leader Arafat to chair a meeting of the Palestine National Council in Amman. [REDACTED]

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Infighting among Arab students escalated again to terrorist violence in late May when two Romanian security officials were killed attempting to defuse a bomb planted in a Syrian student leader's car. The

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Romanian police apprehended two suspects but have been unwilling to provide information on their identity. A Romanian official did tell a US diplomat that the bomb had a sophisticated, antitamper detonation device so sensitive that the slightest movement set it off. The force of the explosion was so great that metal car parts were catapulted four stories in the air. A second bomb was successfully defused.



Romanian President Ceausescu's close ties to PLO Chairman Yasir Arafat could provoke hostile reactions from anti-Arafat students in Romania. Romania Today ©

"Kid Glove" Security Response

Immediately after the December assassination, the Romanians heightened their security posture in hopes of preventing further trouble.

Only on rare occasions—when very alarmed by the volatility of the situation—does the regime resort to force.

Diplomatic Complications

Ceausescu's desire to be an "honest broker" trying to facilitate peace in the Middle East has given him headaches in trying to maintain good relations with all the squabbling parties. To date he has been fairly successful, but he is facing increasing difficulty from all sides. Ceausescu's efforts to promote a negotiated settlement in the Middle East, his open support for PLO Chairman Yasir Arafat, and Romania's ties to Israel could even make the Romanians themselves a target for supporters of the radical Arab states and their client Palestinian groups.

Ceausescu's activities earlier this year no doubt attracted much criticism from radical Arabs in Romania and abroad. In February, he had highly publicized meetings in Bucharest with Arafat, Israeli Prime Minister Peres, and a special envoy of Egyptian President Mubarak, and he also endorsed the PLO-Jordanian accord of 11 February between Arafat and King Hussein.

in contrast to its often heavy-handed tactics toward its own citizens, Bucharest is extremely careful not to take actions that might provoke the Arabs or create a messy diplomatic incident.

When, for example, the Ministry of Interior learns of troublesome student activities, it generally applies pressure through the Ministry of Education rather than using the security forces. In some instances the ringleader is quietly expelled from Romania.

Qadhafi probably hopes his public

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displeasure alone will bring about a more favorable Romanian attitude. Beyond possible economic reprisals, Ceausescu no doubt fears that Libyan students in Romania will carry out terrorist violence.

Ceausescu is also experiencing pressure from Arab moderates. Jordanian Foreign Minister al-Masri, during a visit to Bucharest in April, expressed anger over Ceausescu's refusal to extradite the assassin of the Jordanian diplomat or to allow a Jordanian security team to conduct an interrogation. Even personal appeals from King Hussein did not persuade Ceausescu to cooperate. Consequently all other bilateral issues—including the King's accepting a longstanding invitation to visit Romania—are on hold. While anxious for close ties with Amman, Bucharest no doubt fears that cooperation on the assassination investigation will jeopardize Romania's ties with radical Arabs—Syria and Libya—especially if they are implicated in the murder. The Romanians also may be concerned that the prisoner might reveal embarrassing information about their cooperation with various Palestinian groups and that the extradition of the assassin might touch off violence from radical Palestinian students in Romania. To avoid taking sides, the Romanians probably will stage-manage a low-profile trial that will portray the assassin as mentally unstable and acting independently.

Outlook

Romania is unlikely to become a large-scale terrorist battleground because of its generally tight police controls, but the potential for occasional incidents of violence has increased.

We think there is also a risk that Ceausescu's role in Middle Eastern politics will sooner or later lead radical Arab students, for the first time, to attack Romanian targets. Ceausescu's initiatives to promote a negotiated Middle East settlement or the conviction and sentencing of the assassin of the Jordanian diplomat might be the catalyst. Ceausescu has privately assured the Jordanian Foreign Minister, according to the US Embassy, that the outcome of the trial would be "satisfactory—execution or up to 30 years in prison."

Finally, we believe terrorists might use the student network to attack US or other Western targets in Romania.

In late June the US Embassy reported that a young male with "Mediterranean features and complexion" was observed watching people and vehicles around the Embassy for approximately an hour. The same day the Embassy received a bomb threat although no explosives were found.

Ceausescu almost certainly recognizes that his Middle East balancing act is becoming more precarious and probably feels particularly vulnerable because the security apparatus cannot ensure complete control of the Arab students. As a result, we think Ceausescu, while not abandoning his evenhanded stand, will be cautious in pursuing activities that would anger Libya or Syria. And we believe he may seek a modus vivendi with potential sponsors of terrorist violence in an effort to gain some protection. To appease the more radical groups, for example, Romania could provide at least some indirect support—training, safehaven, and medical care. Despite such tactics, the probability that Bucharest will experience more violence will remain high so long as there is a large concentration of Arab students throughout the country.

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